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ABSTRACT

This paper reports findings of an exploratory field study of the teenager's first year of motherhood. Twelve subjects, aged 14-19, were interviewed a number of times during that year. Interviews were largely unstructured, allowing mothers to express their concerns and feelings. Data for analysis were: (1) narrative style protocols that were recorded as nearly verbatim as possible immediately following interviews; and (2) neonatal perception inventories. Internal constraints included inaccurate interpretations of the situation and the infants' behavior dependence on their mothers, confusion of feminine identity, and expressions of a high level of hostility. Infants' health status reflected their mothers' difficulties; two infants experienced failure-to-thrive syndrome, and one infant suffered a skull fracture. Factors that increased mothering competence included the ability to: progress in other roles, experience reward and gratification in watching their infants grow and mature, experience a changed, more mature relationship with their mothers, and experience a rewarding relationship with a mate. External constraints included conflicting societal values and norms which increased their anxiety, making them feel like misfits. Marriage was viewed by the single teenagers as financially penalizing, as imposing additional work, and as preventing them from getting ahead. Lack of institutional support, i.e., financial help for married couples and child-care centers for all, made it difficult to pursue educational and professional goals. (Author/HFD)

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INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL CONSTRAINTS ON TEENAGE MOTHERING

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An exploratory field approach was used to study the teenager's view of her first year as a mother during 1973-1976. Twelve subjects, ages 14-19, were interviewed twelve times during their first year of motherhood: the first, second, fourth, and sixth week, and the third, fifth, sixth, eighth, ninth, tenth, and twelfth month. The in-depth interviews were largely unstructured to elicit the widest range of concerns and feelings possible. Data for analysis were narrative style protocols that had been recorded as nearly verbatim as possible immediately following interviews, and neonatal perception inventories. Five subjects were single, four were married and living with their husbands, and three were married but separated from their husbands.

This paper focuses on some of the findings related to the internal (from the individual) and external (from the society) constraints that were observed.

Internal Constraints

The ability to achieve a maternal role presupposes emotional, cognitive, and social maturity to respond with nurturing and caretaking behaviors that facilitate the infant's healthy growth and development, and a willingness to accept the impositions of the role.[1,3,4,6] The immature young mother faces conflict as she works on her own development and cares for her infant. Internal constraints of the subjects were reflected in their inaccurate interpretations of the situation and of the infant's behavior, their dependence and identity confusion, and in expressions of hostility.

Inaccurate Interpretation of Situation and Infant's Behavior: The infants were affected physically by the young mothers' inability to assess a situation realistically and to mesh her responses to the infant's needs.

A 14-year-old's infant was hospitalized for failure-to-thrive and a respiratory infection at five months. She was observed to lovingly caress her infant one moment, then the next moment to say, "If it wasn't raining I'd take you to your aunt's, because I'm sure sick of you," and at another time, "I hate you, I hate you, I hate you." She had failed to give her son the medications that were prescribed for him. She became pregnant at seven months; the pills had made her bleed so she just gave up trying.

An 18-year-old's daughter did not grow or gain weight from the fourth to the ninth month. After exhaustive medical tests, the reason for failure to grow was found to be sleep deprivation. This young mother had kept her daughter up for the late, late show on television "to keep her company." The infant began gaining when placed on a schedule that allowed her more rest.

A 16-year-old mother stated she "found her infant in his crib crying and with a lump on the top of his head," (hospitalized and diagnosed by X-ray as skull fracture). She had unrealistic fantasies about her ability to take care of herself or for her future. For example, she planned to "get married next year and honeymoon in Monte Carlo." At the same time she spoke of a lack of money to buy clothing for her infant. Even though she could not tolerate well-balanced meals herself (she had a diagnosis of possible anorexia nervosa at five months), she did not introduce supplemental feedings to her son whom she was breastfeeding.

Crying was often interpreted as "deliberate" to bother the mother or as spoiled behavior. One 14-year-old said she let her daughter cry as long as two hours at night to "get her over her spoiled behavior." She also slapped her and said, "bad girl," when the infant reached for

objects, pounded on table, or fell while attempting to walk. The young subjects who at times were warm and loving with their infants seemed completely unaware that any of their responses could be detrimental to their infant.

Dependence and Identity Confusion: An inability to act independently or to make decisions on their own suggested that some of the mothers were not ready to assume full responsibility for an infant's care. Some of the young subjects' mothers did not recognize their daughters' capacities in a mothering role, and the daughters seemed unable to change this relationship. The 14-year-olds were dependent upon their own mothers for nurturing support for themselves and for help and guidance in caring for their infants. They expressed no desire or ability to function independently. They "liked" and indeed needed their mothers' supportive help. An 18-year-old who gave her daughter to the infant's father at four months identified with her mother "who didn't like babies" and who viewed her as incapable of taking care of herself or her infant. The young mother said, "Babies are brats who manipulate adults," and she spoke of her former husband as a "Slob, and an alcoholic, who used women as maids." This 18-year-old and the two 14-year-olds did not attain the maternal role.

A confusion of feminine identity seemed related to difficulty with the mothering role. The 18-year-old who rejected the mothering role remarked, "I've taken the male role. Like I work, and I get her on weekends...I have all the privileges of a father without any of the responsibilities." Another young subject whose mother sarcastically called her "shorty" had her daughter's ears pierced so that she "would look like a girl." Those who had difficulty with mothering did not maintain an intimate or consistent relationship with a mate. A close relationship

with a supportive mate seemed to help bolster the young woman's self-esteem and to accentuate her feminine identity.

Hostility: A high level of hostility reflected the young woman's conflict and difficulty in coping with the stresses of motherhood. They felt deprived of freedom to go and come as they pleased, of time for themselves, and of their previous way of life. The infants' excretions were bothersome: "She drools all of the time and I can't stand the spit." "Having to get up all during the night and having to wash smelly diapers are the hardest thing."

Derogatory remarks about the infant suggested some of the young mothers' resentment, "She's taken over the house; everything belongs to her." The young mothers' feelings vacillated from kissing the infant one minute to teasing, threatening, or slapping the infant the next. One young mother teased her infant by holding an object just out of reach until the infant cried in frustration.

Factors Increasing Competence: The subjects who achieved the maternal role made remarkable progress in other roles. Two of the young women were graduated from high school and were attending college; one was also employed half-time as a secretary. Four took vocational courses. Three returned to work without seeking additional preparation.

The successful young mothers expressed much reward and gratification in watching their infants grow and mature. Their level of hostility was lower than those who did not achieve the maternal role, and they experienced a changed, more mature relationship with their mothers, and a consistent rewarding relationship with a mate. They and their mates played with and enjoyed their infants. At the end of the year, they perceived that their personal growth and development had been accelerated. They viewed them-

selves as more sensitive to others and as having greater skills to care for another. Their pleasure and satisfaction in their accomplishments were evident in comments such as, "I wouldn't trade this experience for anything. She is very in tune with me. When I cry, she cries," and "We have grown together, and it is really nice. It feels wonderful, and I know I am doing a good job." Those in the 16-17 year-old range appeared to experience the most dramatic acceleration in growth.

External Constraints

The impact of the historical moment on both adolescence and motherhood is relevant.[2,5,7,8] Comments from the young mothers over the first year of their infant's life reflected both their perceived constraints imposed by societal values, and their concerns about societal conditions over which they had no control. Remarks such as, "Why does the world have to be such a terrible place for kids?" and "So many things are wrong in the world. You want better things for your child, and so many things you can't change. You don't know what you can do, or what is best to do," reflect the impact of bribery, deceit, and dishonesty found in the highest offices in the country and in large business corporations during 1973-1976. One young woman rationalized, however, "Sure the world has its problems, but I wouldn't have wanted to live at another time. I like the modern conveniences such as tampax and pampers."

Social Dilemmas for Young Couples: The extended period of adolescence in which young persons may remain in graduate school until their middle twenties before becoming financially independent has also created a problem. Physical and sexual functioning are mature long before the ability to support a family has been fully developed. Consequently, young couples are faced with supporting an infant before they are prepared. One young

subject observed:

> Society is just not set up for young couples. You are supposed to be a swinger, going out all of the time if you are under 30. And our friends were all having trouble if they were married, and most of my ex-husband's friends were single. We didn't go out much. At first it is the status thing, getting a car, then furniture. Then when you get all of that you don't care about all the going out. Then you get bored with each other. I guess that is what happened to us.

One subject who became pregnant at 16 and married four months later stated, "We screwed because we were insecure and felt no one cared." This subject also described herself as a "misfit," "I don't look like a mother or anything when I go out. I can't talk to my girlfriends who are getting ready for the senior prom. They would not understand what I'm talking about." Her young husband described himself as a "boy-man" following an incident which emphasized the asynchrony of the social system. A store-clerk refused to sell him a bottle of wine. The frustrated young wife lamented, "Here he is a father, could be drafted to serve his country, and he can't even buy a bottle of cheap wine."

Disadvantages of Marriage: The young subjects' assertive and independent behavior may have reflected the impact of the feminist movement. The stigma of single motherhood was not sufficient to prompt the young women to rush into marriages that the young fathers sometimes suggested. One 16-year-old observed, "He doesn't want to work and help out with any of the expenses. Because I made one mistake (pregnancy) I don't need to make another one. He is too possessive. He tries to be my mother, father, and everything. He is so jealous. Jack (current boyfriend) just lets me be."

A 17-year-old commented:

> If I had the choice of what was easiest or what I'd rather do--live with just the baby or live with just a man, I'd say the baby. I'd rather live with just the baby any day. It is easier to live with a baby. They can't complain about the way you do things, and they

> can't argue with you. You are sure that you always have control. Like her daddy said to me, 'I'll be glad when we get our apartment, then I'll have someone to cook for me.' I said, 'I will be going to college and that is like working, and I can't do all the cooking, it will be your responsibility too. Just because you work doesn't mean that I have to do everything.'

This remark came from a Latino girl who lived in a four-generation household and who grew up under male dominance. At one year, she had neither married the father of her baby, nor had she moved in with him. "When you get married, it is different. Everything changes. Well like men---they think they own you then. And if you aren't married you can just walk out if you want to and forget about everything," and "I don't want him to hold me back," suggest that the freedom to achieve and to be independent are highly valued by today's young woman. The goal of "wife and mother" did not seem to be a priority at this point in their lives.

Marriage was viewed as financially penalizing (through loss of welfare aid), as imposing additional work burdens, and as depriving them of an opportunity to get ahead. One young mother said that there would be no way to swing it if she lost her welfare assistance; therefore, as she contemplated moving to an apartment with the father of the baby, she said, "Marriage is not the best option for us."

The four married subjects received no welfare assistance, experienced financial hardships and heavy work-loads in managing a household that the single mother avoided. However, despite the newness of marriage with the additional adjustments for the young couples, all of the married subjects were able to resolve the stresses precipitated by their infants' birth, and were successful in the parenting role.

Societal Norms in Mothering: The disparity between the societal protrait of the smiling mother who fulfills her role with ease, and the real-life hasseled, weary mother with little sleep, creates a feeling of abnormality

or inferiority for the new mother. At best, all mothers seek to meet the societal norms, so that they aren't considered as some sort of freak. The young mothers were no exception in avidly seeking societal approval. They worried whether the doctor would judge the infant as overweight or underweight because they had overfed or underfed the infant. Another was reluctant to leave her daughter with a babysitter and expressed her nervousness at letting others hear her baby fuss, "I hate for her to fuss for other people. I'm afraid they'll think I don't take good care of her or they don't like to hear a baby fuss." The young subjects frequently asked about other mothers in the study saying, "I want to know how I compare with the other mothers."

The concern to conform to societal expectations could be more acute in the young mother who lacks maturity to admit to possible failure. Their parents and others have probably hinted that the mothering task was too great for one so young, e.g., "When I got pregnant my mother told me I had gotten myself into the mess, and I was the one who had to take care of it. She told me not to ever expect her to baby-sit for me."

Insufficient Societal Supports: Much energy has been directed to the care of the young pregnant teenager. However, the extensive services usually end after the first school semester following the infant's birth. The lack of child-care facilities for young infants and the high cost of baby-sitters made it impossible for young mothers without family members who were willing to care for their infants' to seek employment or to continue in school. The young person who is educationally handicapped can neither earn sufficient pay to support a family in this inflationary era nor can she afford to return to school without special assistance.

Summary

Findings from this exploratory study support that young parents face many internal and external constraints in their work of parenting. If marriage and the family unit are society's desired structure for rearing children, current institutions and practices merit study and possible restructuring in order to enable youthful parents to choose marriage. The very young mother needs nurturing care for herself as well as help with her infant. Child-care centers are badly needed if the young mother is to pursue her own development that will enable her to fulfill the maternal and other adult roles.

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